

Evelyn Burg

**NEH Seminar Multi-tiered Low-Stakes Classroom Assignment for ENG102
(Composition II, Required Core Competency Deposit)**

Developed from “A minute for an image” by filmmaker Agnes Varda

Abstract: This assignment was designed in this seminar for students in ENG102, the second required composition course, generally taken by upper freshmen or lower sophomores. It uses images of war to have students address questions of visual rhetoric, interpretation of texts, visual narrative, formalism versus critical theory, issues of content versus form in visual and literary mediums so as to highlight analogies and distinctions. This is an extended thought exercise including class discussion and low-stakes writing. The design uses another medium (mostly photography) to take students through steps in developing a subtle, complex interpretation from an apparently literal or transparent text; students practice how to interrogate, interpret and analyze an aesthetic/communicative artifact and apply the analyses of critics (and critique those critics as well).

This is a low-stakes written assignment connected to the course’s required formal scaffolded assignment of a 1000+ word analytical essay integrating both criticism and textual quotations on behalf of an argument about a literary text. The exercises and discussion will take one 2-hour class period and counts as part of their low-stakes written work. All low-stakes class participation counts for 20% of the term grade. This work should be used in the final formal paper if possible. The core competencies developed in the assignment are “Inquiry and Problem-Solving” and “Written Ability.”

Pre-readings for students:

Susan Sontag, *On Regarding the Pain of Others*, (1 page excerpt)

Martha Rosler, “In around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)” (excerpt)

David Levi Strauss, “Over Bin Laden’s Dead Body”

Kenneth Burke’s “War, Response and Contradiction” (excerpt)

Vocabulary (can be written on a sheet or board):

Visual, viewer, foreground, background, subject, action, composition, contrast, depth, shade/shadow, highlight, front-lit, back-lit, story, movement/motion, stillness/stasis

Interrogations (written on board):

A. “A picture is worth a 1000 words.” What does this mean?

B. Photographs are informational, “real” representations and self-evident, right?

Therefore, what is there to say about them other than a description of an images’ content?

Discuss: Photo as fact; photo as record/registration; as personal or artistic expression; photo as responsible act, as hobby, voluntary self-representation, bureaucratic identification

Think about IDs or passport photos-- exit visa, entrance visa; are they facts? How are we, the subjects situated in these apparently mundane representations? Can these be metaphors?

I. Freewrite

Faculty: Presents 4 photographic war image[s] on screen (e.g., Robert Capa, Tony Vaccaro, Don McCullin, Matthew Brady)

Students (individually): Take two minutes to look at an image and write what they see, then the image changes. Return to images, write how they make you feel? Report out.

Faculty: Locates commonalities and differences

Whole class: Discussion of the framing/generation and communication of
A. narratives (the what) B. aesthetics (the how) C. What is communicated?

Faculty/class discussion:

An image works without words, but does it have a language? How does it communicate?

Ask: Is there ambiguity (explain term) in the language of the image?

How do we locate possible meanings and significances? How do we justify those interpretations, or what is our evidence?

What can this tell us about written language?

Perspectives: Close “readings,” and “theory” applied to a visual text. Situating the image similar to situating the literary in a context to write about it.

Archibald MacLeish’s “Land of the Free,” or Wilfred Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” or another suitable war poem. Students will read out loud in class and discuss images and sounds.

Faculty: Show 1-2 Martha Rosler’s photo-collages from “House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home,” and “Beauty Knows No Pain.” Discuss “protest art” and the concept of the “documentary” as constructed. (Quote various photographers on it.) Look at J. S. Sargent’s “Gassed.” How does the juxtaposition of imagery create a new perspective? Does this work in writing? How is it done?

II. Directed writing: (Students alone or in pairs) Match up one photograph and one key sentence in Burke, Sontag, Rosler or Levi-Strauss and write a paragraph about how it applies and/or does not apply (it can be both) to the responses you had to one of the photographs. Do **try** to make your paragraph complete, with a topic or lead sentence, full explanation and illustration. (15 minutes)

Report out to the whole. In dialogue with the class, the faculty then draws out analogies in critical approaches to the visual and literary.

In the final paper, the student will: 1. Decide on a meaning of a whole or part of a chosen major literary text (read for the class) relating to war, and, 2. Use close readings as part of

their argument and, 3. Select a theoretical point from one critic about viewing pain/war in images, connecting it however they like to the literary text and, 4. Select and integrate quotations from the literary text, the cited critic within a larger argument about that literary text.

Connection to the “Meanings of War” Seminar: This assignment for my ENG102 class, which is focused on post-WWII literature was developed entirely in the seminar. My colleague Chris Schmitt and I both are interested in photography and presented a session (using the readings above) on how photographic images of war have complex moral valences and thus present multi-layered issues of interpretation with clear analogies to interpreting literary texts. The students at LaGuardia often have immediate or ancillary experience of war. They also may often be better readers of images than written text and this assignment allows them to use that experience as a form of access to ambiguous written text.